DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 713 CE 056 558

AUTHOR Lever, Linda
TITLE Working with Beginners.
INSTITUTION Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, London (England).
REPORT NO ISSN-0260-5104
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 5p.; ALBSU, No. 39, Autumn 1990.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Reading Programs; *Beginning Reading; *Classroom Techniques; Foreign Countries; Language Experience Approach; *Mnemonics; *Reading Instruction; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The reading instructor working with adult "beginners" needs to have an open mind, be willing to be imaginative and adventurous, and think positively. The basic approach requires the instructor to build beginners' confidence; encourage beginners to participate fully, think for themselves, and learn to learn; involve beginners in planning; and provide for social breaks. Since beginners have a great deal to learn, it is well worth spending time and effort on memory aids, such as a reference file; memory joggers; regular review; and building on what has been done before. Some suggestions for review include starting points or using what students already know; language experience; and using signs and notices. Supplemental reading materials that can be used with beginners include short texts from everyday reading and specially written easy readers. Teachers of beginners should consider shared reading if the student selects a too difficult text. Phonics and writing can also be used as reading aids and helps. Much individual support is needed to give beginners a good start, so volunteers should be enlisted to achieve the right balance between support and developing independence. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ALBSU
Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M Smith
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED326713

WORKING WITH BEGINNERS

Linda Lever, ABE Organiser in charge of resources at Liverpool Adult Basic Education Unit, sets out practical approaches to working with beginners.

Who are the 'Beginners'?

If you have ever worked with a student who has a family and a job, can talk to you in an interesting way about all sorts of things, has learned to drive and make clothes yet still finds reading an almost impossible task, you will know the sort of beginner I have in mind. However, please don't put this aside if you are working with students who haven't achieved so much or who have special needs in the sense of a mental disability because many of the ideas below can be equally applicable for you.

Unfortunately there is not space here to address directly the question of beginning numeracy, but the first section should certainly be relevant since discussion to promote understanding and learning how to learn are of vital importance to numeracy beginners too.

Of course beginners are not all the same. They will bring with them a variety of experiences, aptitudes, ideas and ways of learning, so that there can be no absolute 'rules' about working with beginners; you will need to try things out and find out together what works. However, an open mind and a willingness to be imaginative and adventurous will definitely help.

Above all you need to *think positively*:

- don't underestimate beginners
- don't 'mother' them – it's easy to patronise without realising it
- do have faith in beginners' ability to learn
- do use imaginative materials and methods
- do emphasise what beginners can do – the skills they have already

A beginner at reading is not a beginner at talking, listening, thinking or coping with life in general.

The Basic Approach

Build confidence

One thing that most beginners do have in common is an extreme lack of confidence when it comes to the basic literacy skills. They will have learned to feel 'thick' in this area and cannot derive the comfort often expressed by students working on writing and spelling: "Well, at least I'm OK at reading." Listing and discussing the things they have successfully learned to do in their everyday lives might be useful here, as will plenty of discussion and building up gradually from what they already know. A feeling of success and progress is the biggest confidence booster, so charting progress is particularly important, too.

Learn about learning

Beginners are more likely than other students to be passive, to wait to be 'taught' and to be told what to do, so it is particularly important that they should be encouraged to participate fully and think for themselves. This might seem an uphill battle at first but it is well worth the effort; no-one is going to learn effectively unless they are actively involved and have effective strategies for learning and remembering. Learning to learn is also the key to confidence building so ...

Discuss

- how they have learned other things
- how people's memories work
- strategies other people use for learning (see 'memory aids')

Explain

- how important it is to understand and ask questions
- that learning takes effort and time

2
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- that a little work every day is far more effective than a big effort once a week
- why you would like to try out different methods

Find out

- how they are feeling about their learning

> REMEMBER: ASK · LISTEN · EXPLAIN
> THE STUDENT DOES THE LEARNING
> YOU CAN ONLY SUPPORT THIS PROCESS

Beginners will probably have a lot of unlearning to do. They might think that reading is decoding rather than understanding the text, that they can't read long words before they know all the short ones, that they have to learn all the letter sounds before they begin to read, that guessing is cheating, that they have to learn to read before they can write and so on. Obviously this will call for a lot of explaining and discussion, too.

Plan together

Don't be tempted to think that beginners can't be thoroughly involved in planning and evaluating what they do. Setting goals and thinking how you will achieve them is an essential part of the learning process and beginners should be fully consulted at every stage.

> *DANGER: It's easy to 'take over' when recording things for someone who finds writing extremely difficult, so make sure that you discuss what is to be recorded. Write while the students reads and follows. If necessary read it over again together making any alterations required. It will be good practice in reading and looking at words so it won't be time wasted.*

Have some social breaks

It helps beginners to gain confidence and feel relaxed if they are given a chance to talk about things other than their ABE work. Talking to other students and tutors over a cup of tea or on a social occasion, explaining about something they are interested in, or taking part in a discussion on a topical subject can all be good confidence builders. They should help the student to feel more comfortable in the group and accepted as a fellow student with valued opinions, not just seen as the person who is worst at reading and writing. (If you are not in a group situation you can still discuss ordinary things, but don't let this take over altogether).

Memory Aids

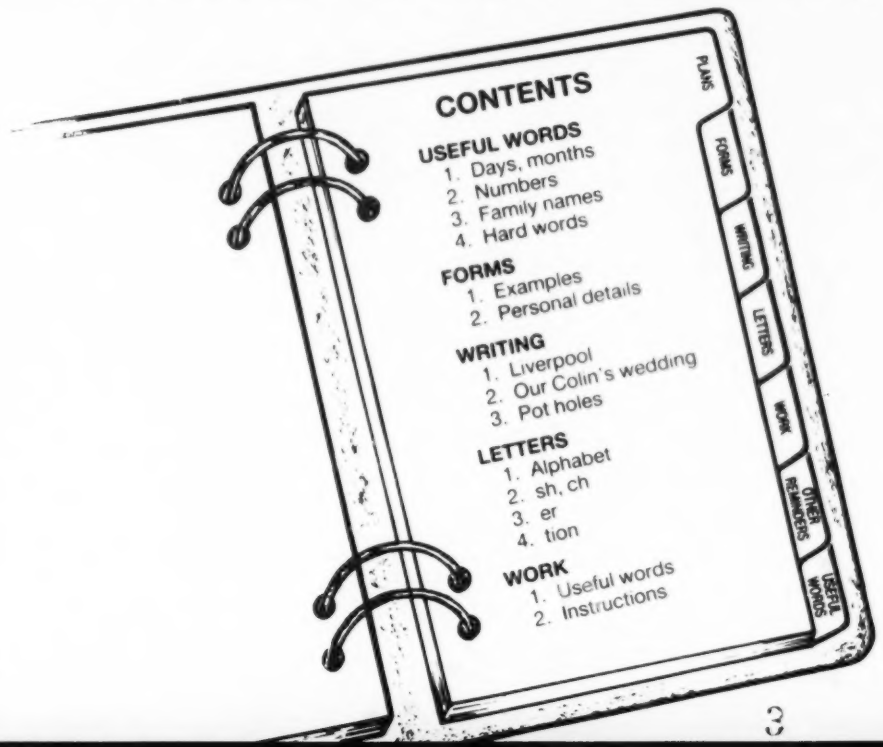
By definition beginners have a great deal to learn and commit to memory and will probably find learning difficult, especially in the early stages. It is well worth spending some time and effort on memory aids in the early stages, since these will make learning far more effective.

Keep a reference file

The best memory aid I have found is a reference file which will also help the student to gain independence and establish useful access and study skills. In Liverpool we have built this requirement in to the beginners' stage of our local Open College accreditation. Students have, after some preliminary doubts and much joint effort, produced files in which they can:

- look up the alphabet, months of the year, etc.
- store word families and add to them as they encounter more words
- look back on and read over language experience sentences (see below)
- keep examples of completed forms, personal details, letters, etc., for reference
- find words and phrases which have given particular difficulty
- keep a list of books and other items read.

The act of thinking about and recording useful facts is an aid to memory in itself. Combined with a record of planning and achievements this makes a really good basis for future work. After initial support, it becomes an aid that can be used independently. For some time a scribe will be needed, e.g. for planning, but students must feel that they 'own' the document and that they can gradually take over the writing as they gain skills and confidence.



Memory joggers

Words and parts of words can be highlighted and have attention drawn to them in various ways. This is especially effective in a reference file where an illustration, an ending in colour, or a special 'key' word in a decorative box can carry the memory back to a particular page and help in the recall of other items.

Memory can also be jogged by rhymes, nonsense phrases and associating words with other words, objects, patterns or feelings so that, in discussion, students can be encouraged to make such connections for items which they are finding difficult.

Review things regularly, build on what you have done before

There's a limit to what you can learn at once, especially if you lack confidence, so it is necessary to go over the same ground again and again with beginners. Looking things up in a reference file is an excellent form of revision, the file can also be a good memory jogger for a tutor since it is a reminder of words and letter patterns used before and to be used again. It is particularly important for beginners that those working with them are sensitive to what they are likely to know and what might cause difficulty. Finding a variety of imaginative ways of going over the same ground is one of the biggest challenges of working with beginners and the following sections contain some ideas on this.

1. Starting Points

Find out what the student knows already; there are often many familiar words (name and address, family names, very common words, etc) which can be used in simple sentences even for someone who says they can read nothing.

2. Language experience

This method has been described many times before, but cannot be ignored when writing about beginners. It is based on getting a student talking and having a scribe write down the words as near verbatim as possible. The idea is that, by using ideas and language which are familiar to the student, reading will be facilitated and interest assured. The words can be copied, cut out and handled in various ways: matching them to the original, putting them in different orders, classifying them in a variety of ways and just talking about them. Many students have started off successfully using this approach but some words of warning are necessary:

- do negotiate with the student about what should be written (she/he may not like the word-for-word version any more than you would if someone wrote down exactly what you said)
- don't attempt more than a couple of sentences to begin with
- don't use the method without explaining what it's all about
- do record the sentences for future use, preferably with a picture cue (e.g. a family photo, a newspaper picture, an advertisement)

As well as handling the words and talking about them, various follow-up exercises can be worked on, perhaps by the students on her/his own at a later date.

Use the words:

- in a wordsearch puzzle
- in a close exercise
- for new sentences
- to make anagrams
- to make true/false statements about the passage
- to make a sequencing exercise, where muddled words, phrases or sentences have to be put in a sensible order.
- If you have access to a computer, the sentences can also be copied and word processed (possibly by the student) to give an impressive looking reference copy.

3. Using signs and notices

Photographs of signs and notices taken locally can provide a very good starting point. We have made a pack in Liverpool (Picture Starters) based on local photos and divided into topic areas with relevant activities to reinforce the reading and also a video with voice over to support one of the topics. These are not available for distribution but are ideas which could easily be copied elsewhere. Many of the words might already be familiar and the context provided by the surroundings in the photo is a great help to guessing the rest. Often the pictures will spark off comments which can be used as a source of language experience sentences, or you can simply use the words to form simple sentences for the student to read.

The words on the notices are often long and memorable, giving students confidence from the feeling that they can handle long words. They can also look out for signs, and try to read them when they are out.

Other reading materials

Everyday reading

Beginners can often be amazingly successful at reading short texts which might have appeared to be too difficult for them, given an interesting and relevant topic, enough help from the context and enough thoughtful preparation (i.e. discussion of what might be expected and the sort of words which might crop up). Newspaper headlines and picture captions, advertisements, leaflets, letters, packets, instructions, and so on can be a rich source of material but care must be taken to limit the task to a very short piece.

What of books?

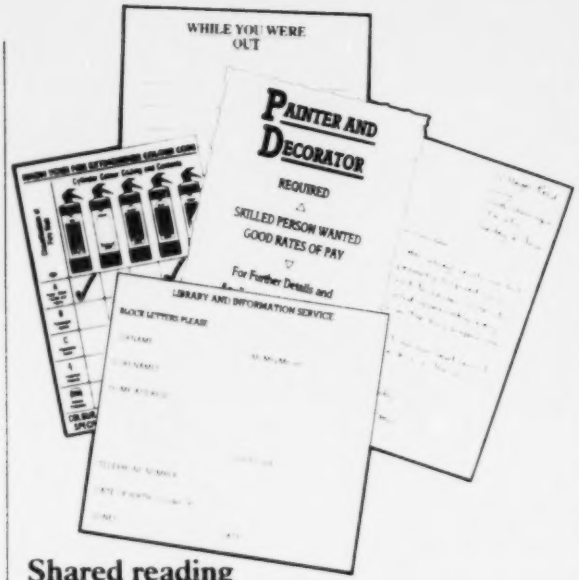
Often beginner students are not content until they feel they can tackle books; this feeling should certainly be respected, though they should be encouraged to read other things as well. The selection of books should be very much up to the individual; many specialist ABE publishers are producing easy readers so the choice is increasing all the time. Prepare by discussing the content and looking at words so that reading is more likely to be successful and enjoyable.

Tips for Students

- understanding and enjoying what you read is the aim
- it's certainly not necessary to learn all the words in a book, or any other text, before you move on to something else
- the more often you encounter and take note of common words the more likely you are to remember them; it's a gradual process
- talk about what you read and think critically about it
- don't attempt too much at once
- above all – *keep thinking*

Tips for Tutors

- Don't avoid long or unusual words – they are often much easier to remember than short ones
- Don't avoid controversial subjects or issues
- find a balance between introducing new materials and re-reading or doing follow-up work on ones you have used before (negotiate with the student over this)
- discuss any mistakes or 'miscues' – try to find out why they occurred
- *introduce challenging, stimulating materials.*



Shared reading

It may be that a text which a student has chosen to read is too difficult to read alone at first. Here a shared or paired reading technique can be employed. Again, this has been described in detail elsewhere (see ALBSU Newsletter No. 32). The basic principle is that a helper provides as much support as the student wants or needs in order to achieve a fluent read with good understanding of the text. This might mean the student just joining in with a few words or listening at first; or perhaps she/he will read most of the words with the helper joining in only occasionally. It is again something which needs to be talked about and negotiated. The amount of support will vary according to the ability of the individual and the readability of that particular text for her/him.

Another alternative is for the helper to read the text on to a tape, after agreeing on a suitable speed. This can be good for follow-up work, too.

Should reading aloud be allowed?

Beginners often think that they have to read aloud, but this is not always a good thing. If they are aiming to become independent readers they must obviously learn to read to themselves and this should be encouraged whenever possible. It is also very likely that someone who is required to read aloud will be nervous and inhibited, especially when there are a lot of more able readers around. Give a student a chance to read through a piece before you talk about it together and encourage her/him to identify the really difficult words. Encourage reading through the piece silently again afterwards as well.

What about phonics?

In my experience many adult beginner readers become so obsessed with 'sounding out' words that they find it very difficult to progress and become fluent. They think that it is cheating to guess words or to say what they think a word is without checking every letter first (though keeping individual letter sounds in mind and then working out a word of more than 4 or 5 letters is an enormous feat of memory). I have also encountered many beginners who feel that there is some magic key in learning letter sounds; they are unaware of all the irregularities which make this strategy on its own impossible. Of course, it is extremely useful to get a 'lead in' to an unknown word with the first letter(s) and sound. (Try it yourself in a cloze exercise, it makes the task much easier.) It is also invaluable to recognise endings and groups of letters. What is needed is a view of letters and sounds as one of the range of cues which can be used for a successful read. The worst thing that can happen is that students are prevented from reading long, interesting, memorable words and stimulating materials because they have not managed to associate individual letters with sounds.

Here's how phonics can be used as a reading aid:

1. Relate the initial sounds of words to words which are easily recognised already – from language experience, signs, familiar names, etc.
2. Begin to learn groups of letters for the beginnings of words (e.g. sh ph) as they arise – discuss them and note in the reference file, adding other examples as you come across them and noting any exceptions.
3. Look at the longer words the student already knows, divide them up into syllables, talk about them and listen to them.
4. Note the sounds at the ends of words, paying particular attention to common endings such as ly and ing – the sounds attached to groups of letters are much easier to recognise and remember than individual letters.
5. Collect and record words containing the same sound and letter pattern as they are recognised (don't provide word lists – unfamiliar words introduced in this way will be meaningless).
6. Leave the middles of words, vowels and final e's until the student has some confidence and fluency, unless she/he particularly asks about this; you can pay more attention to these details when working on writing.

Writing helps

Words are much more likely to be remembered if they have been written down, so encourage students to write as much as they can or to take an active part in any writing you do on their behalf. Supplying the first letter of a word or the ending is a good way to reinforce the work done on sounds. Actively trying to recall the look of a common word in order to write it down is good reinforcement, too.

Beginners usually need to do some essential writing for forms, notes, etc., but this can be extended to taking a more active part in language experience work, composing letters and so on.

Support for beginners

Like all students beginners are entitled to the full range of learning opportunities and should be able to benefit from groups and open/flexible learning as well as the more sheltered forms of provision.

However, it can be seen that much individual support is needed if they are to be given a good start and to see the progress which is essential to maintain motivation. The secret is to obtain the right balance between support and developing independence. Beginners need to be left to work things out for themselves, to re-read items to themselves, to try out some writing or complete an exercise but they usually need to be sure that someone who has a good knowledge of their abilities and worries is on hand to help (confidence is easily lost, especially in the early stages). This in-depth acquaintance with the beginner is also essential for the design of suitable activities, shared reading, etc.

There are obvious implications here for the use of volunteers trained to work with beginners and with time to relate to just one or two students in the initial stages of their learning. A flexible learning situation where beginners can attend as often as they like during the week, have access to all sorts of materials, relate to other students, yet feel comfortable and find the individual attention and support which is essential to them would seem to be the ideal situation for achieving the support/independence balance and progressing to greater self sufficiency. If you are working in a one to one pair, perhaps you should investigate more social situations, if in a conventional group or open learning workshop, perhaps volunteer helpers are needed or maybe the ones you have need to be deployed or trained in a different way.

Beginners are arguably the most difficult group of students to attract to provision and to keep motivated; they are also the ones in greatest need of good quality provision. We should all be working to give them the good start to which they are entitled.

No. 39 Autumn 1990 — Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, Kingsbourne House, 229-231 High Holborn, London WC1V 7DA.
Tel: 071-405 4017. Fax: 071-404 5038
ISSN 0260-5104